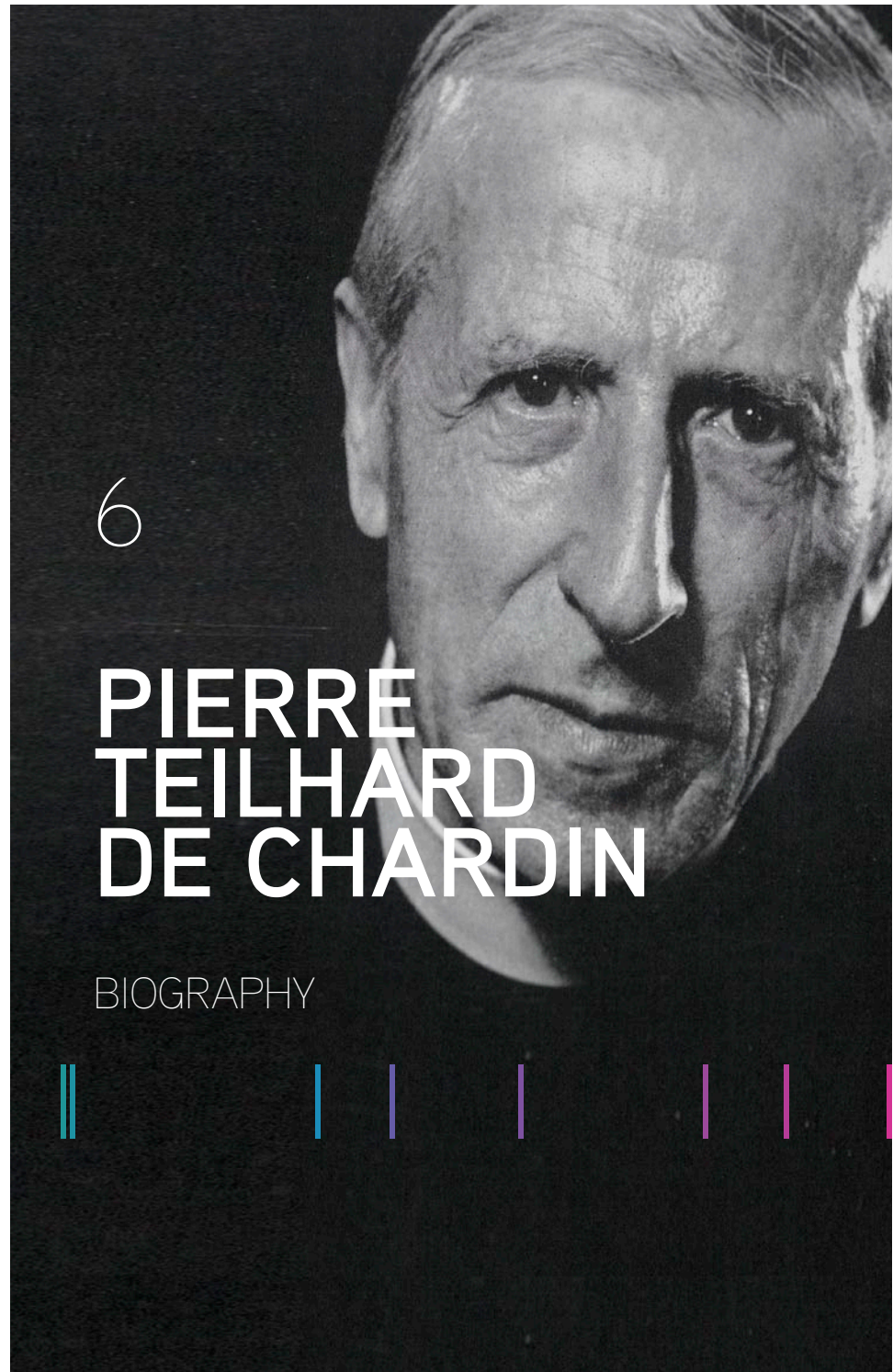


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PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

BIOGRAPHY



BIG HISTORY PROJECT



PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

PALEONTOLOGIST,
MYSTIC & JESUIT PRIEST

Born
May 1, 1881
Orcines, France

Died
April 10, 1955
New York, New York

By Cynthia Stokes Brown

As a paleontologist and a Catholic priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin formulated his own unique vision for a synthesis of science and religion.

Youth, vocation, and early thoughts on evolution

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (pronounced tay-YAR-de-shar-DAN) was born on his family's estate in the countryside of central France in 1881. The nearest town, Clermont-Ferrand, was the birthplace of 17th-century mathematician and religious philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), best known for inventing a mechanical calculator and for writings that defended the Christian faith. Teilhard was the fourth of 11 children in a minor aristocratic family.

Teilhard's father was an amateur naturalist who collected rocks, insects, fossils, and plants. His deeply religious mother, the great-grandniece of the 18th-century French philosopher Voltaire, instilled in her son a devotion to Jesus. The family lived in the countryside among volcanic mountains and forested hills, and Teilhard grew to embrace both of his parents' greatest interests: love of the Earth and love of the Christian God.



Puy-de-Dôme is one of many dormant volcanos in central France

Shortly before he turned 11, Teilhard went to a Jesuit college to study philosophy and mathematics. At 18 he entered a Jesuit novitiate to become a priest, but due to newly enacted French anticlerical laws, he was forced to move to England. Teilhard completed his studies there in 1905 and was sent to teach chemistry and physics in Cairo, where he was enthralled by Egypt's natural beauty and collected fossils at every opportunity.

In 1908 Teilhard returned to England to study theology. There, in Henri Bergson's book *Creative Evolution* (published 1907), he encountered the idea that evolution is driven, not by natural selection, as Darwin believed, but by an *élan vital*, or vital force. Teilhard disagreed with Bergson's main idea (as do nearly all modern scientists), but he was inspired to form his own view that the cosmos itself is evolving. Writing in 1950, he described the effect Bergson's book had on him:

...I can now see quite clearly that the only effect that brilliant book had upon me was to provide fuel at just the right moment, and very briefly, for a fire that was already consuming my heart and mind. And that fire had been kindled, I imagine, simply by the coincidence in me...of the three inflammable elements that had slowly piled up in the depths of my soul over a period of thirty years. These were the cult of Matter, the cult of Life, and the cult of Energy.

(The Heart of Matter, p. 25)

At 30, Teilhard was ordained as a Catholic priest and the next year was sent to study in the paleontology laboratory of the National Museum of Natural History in Paris. There, he became interested in human paleontology.

During the time of the world wars

Before Teilhard could finish his studies, however, World War I intervened. In December 1914 he became a stretcher-bearer at the front, where he witnessed the terrible carnage of trench warfare. He entered the “no-man’s zone” to recover the dead and injured in some of the main battles of the war — such as the eight-month battle of Verdun, where three-quarters of a million soldiers died. Teilhard was awarded several medals for bravery. This experience led him to envision a larger meaning of life, with humanity evolving toward something bigger and more spiritual. In his 1918 essay “The Great Monad” he wrote:

The Whole of History teaches us this lesson, that after every revolution and after every war Mankind has always emerged a little more self-cohesive, a little more unified, because the links that hold its organism together are more firmly locked together and hope of a common emancipation has become strengthened.... It will not be long before the human mass closes in upon itself and groups all its members in a definitively realized unity. Respect for one and the same law, one and the same orientation, one and the same spirit, are tending to overlay the permanent diversity of individuals and nations. Wait but a little longer, and we shall form but one solid block. The cement is already setting.
(*The Heart of Matter*, pp. 184–85)

During the war Teilhard wrote 18 essays, formulating some of his most fundamental ideas about the relationship between a Christian God and the natural world. In the “Cosmic Life,” he wrote: “There is a communion with God and a communion with the Earth and a communion with God through the Earth.... In this first basic vision we begin to see how the kingdom of God and cosmic love can be reconciled: the bosom of Mother Earth is, in some way, the bosom of God.” He concluded: “To live the cosmic life is to live with the dominating consciousness that each one of us is an atom of the mystical and cosmic body of Christ.”

Teilhard took his final vows as a priest in 1918, and in early 1919 he was demobilized. He lectured in paleontology and geology at the Catholic Insti-

tute of Paris and studied at the University of Paris (Sorbonne), writing his doctoral thesis about French mammals from 55 to 48 million years ago. In 1923 he went to China with another priest to study stones and fossils in western Mongolia.

Two years later, Teilhard returned to Paris and resumed teaching at the Catholic Institute, where he was reproached for attempting to establish friendly relations between science and religion. Teilhard’s “Notes on Some Possible Historical Representations of Original Sin,” for example, tried to reconcile the latest discoveries about human origins with the doctrine of original sin. After revoking his license to teach, the Jesuit Curia sent him back to China for research, in effect protecting him from possible harsher measures by the papal authorities.

Teilhard spent most of the next 20 years in China. In early 1929 he joined the National Geological Survey of China and took part in the excavations, in December 1929, that uncovered a *Homo erectus* skull, known as Peking man. As the stratigrapher (a geologist who studies layers of the rock record), Teilhard played a major role in dating the discovery.

While in China, Teilhard wrote what would become his best-known work, *The Phenomenon of Man*. However, his superiors refused to permit its publication in 1944 and again in 1948. He returned to Paris but was not allowed to teach. He connected with the Wenner-Gren Foundation in New York City and in 1951 moved there to work as a researcher; under its auspices he made two trips to Africa.

Teilhard’s view of an evolving Universe

Teilhard was both a scientist and a mystic. His views on religion were blended with a visionary fire like that of the poets William Blake (1757–1827), Gerard Manly Hopkins (1844–89), and Sri Aurobindo Ghosh (1872–1950). In Teilhard’s view, the unfolding, evolving Universe is both a physical and a spiritual event. The Universe begins with matter, some of which develops into a new level (life), which develops into human consciousness, which

becomes concentrated until it reaches what he called the “Omega Point.” God is implicit from the beginning, but the Universe is gradually making divinity explicit.

Teilhard invented words to express his ideas, including *noosphere* (from the Greek word *noos*, for mind), which he used in a 1925 essay called “Hom-inization” — another word he invented to refer to human reflection/intelligence. The noosphere is a “thinking” sphere circling the Earth above the biosphere, which comprises human reflection, conscious souls, and love.

Teilhard explained that the Universe has a direction of increasing complexity and consciousness. He named the goal toward which the Universe is headed the “Omega Point, a Universe that has become God.” The Omega Point exerts its force on everything; Teilhard describes it thus:

Because it contains and engenders consciousness, space-time is necessarily of a convergent nature. Accordingly its enormous layers, followed in the right direction, must somewhere ahead become involuted to a point we might call *Omega*, which fuses and consumes them integrally in itself. (*The Phenomenon of Man*, p. 259)

Final years and posthumous works

Teilhard left Paris for good in 1951 and lived his final years in New York City, residing at the Jesuit church of St. Ignatius and working for the Wenner-Gren Foundation. He died from a heart attack on Easter Sunday in 1955.

Teilhard was prolific: he wrote 11 volumes of scientific work, three books, and 200-plus essays. Many of his scientific papers were published during his lifetime, but the Church would not allow his religious or philosophical essays to be published until after his death. *The Phenomenon of Man* came out in 1955, and *The Divine Milieu* appeared in 1957. They were international best sellers and have been translated into 22 languages. In late 1957 the Holy Office withdrew Teilhard’s books from seminary libraries and ordered they not be sold in Catholic bookstores. In 1962 the Vatican claimed that

Teilhard’s books contained “such ambiguities and indeed even serious errors, as to offend Catholic doctrine,” without indicating what the errors were.

Now that decree and reprimand are largely forgotten. The Second Vatican Council (1962–68), led by Pope John XXIII, wanted, like Teilhard, to define the relationship of Christ to the Universe. The current pope, Benedict XVI, made a general statement of praise in July 2009 for Teilhard’s “great vision.” Teilhard’s ideas have inspired many Catholics as well as non-Catholics.

Admirers include American writer Flannery O’Connor, who took the title of her last collection of short stories, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965), from Teilhard’s essay “Omega Point,” in which he wrote:

Remain true to yourself, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love! At the summit you will find yourselves united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. For everything that rises must converge.

But Teilhard’s ideas continued to offend some theologians and some scientists as well. Scientists in general do not believe in evolution toward a goal or purpose (an idea known as orthogenesis or teleology). Peter Medawar, a Brazilian/British biologist, objected to Teilhard’s attributing consciousness to matter. Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould suggested that Teilhard might have been involved in perpetrating the Piltdown hoax, in which bones discovered in Sussex, England, were presented as the so-called “missing link” between humans and apes. (Teilhard made follow-up investigations at the site; the discovery was questioned by a colleague of Teilhard’s and definitively discredited in 1953, when radiometric dating showed the skull and jaw to have come from differing, not to mention relatively recent, times.)

Teilhard and the information age

More recently Teilhard's ideas have attracted people in the technology world. To some, the Internet seems to have fulfilled his prophecy of a noosphere. As Jennifer Cobb Kreisberg wrote in *Wired* magazine in 1995:

Teilhard imagined a stage of evolution characterized by a complex membrane of information enveloping the globe and fueled by human consciousness. It sounds a little off-the-wall, until you think about the Net, that vast electronic web encircling the Earth, running point to point through a nerverlike constellation of wires. We live in an intertwined world of telephone lines, wireless satellite-based transmissions, and dedicated computer circuits that allow us to travel electronically from Des Moines to Delhi in the blink of an eye. Teilhard saw the Net coming more than half a century before it arrived.

A movement known as transhumanism wants to apply technology to overcome human limitations. Followers believe that computers and humans may combine to form a "super brain," or that computers may eventually exceed human brain capacity. Some transhumanists refer to that future time as the "Singularity." In his 2008 article "Teilhard de Chardin and Transhumanism," Eric Steinhart wrote that:

Teilhard de Chardin was among the first to give serious consideration to the future of human evolution.... [He] is almost certainly the first to describe the acceleration of technological progress to a singularity in which human intelligence will become super intelligence.

Teilhard challenged theologians to view their ideas in the perspective of evolution and challenged scientists to examine the ethical and spiritual implications of their knowledge. He fully affirmed cosmic and biological evolution and saw them as part of an even more encompassing spiritual evolution toward the goal of ultrahumans and complete divinity. This hypothesis still resonates for some as a way to place scientific fact within an overarching spiritual view of the cosmos, though most scientists today reject the notion that the Universe is moving toward some clear goal.

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